

FOUR-TONED ANNOUNCEMENTS ON MBOLE TALKING GONGS

by

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While staying in the village of Yatolema (Opala territory of the Stanleyville District of Belgian Congo), I was surprised to hear gong announcements being made on two separate instruments, one small and the other large, so that four distinct notes were being used. As in many other areas of Belgian Congo, the talking drums of the Mbole tribe reproduce essential tones of linguistic elements of a corresponding spoken language and in all cases that I have met in this area, the spoken languages have only two essential tones. The problem therefore presented itself as to why four notes were being used when normally two are adequate.

The announcements heard were being made in connection with the gathering of clan-heads called *kumi* from the area around Yatolema in order to prepare for the *ekanga*¹ rites whereby boys in the family group paying for the ceremonies are allowed to change their names. Mbole groups in which similar announcements are known stretch from Yakaki, a Yaamba village situated on the South bank of the Congo just below Stanleyville (opposite the Baptist Mission Station of Yakusu), through the sections of Botunga, Busa, Ikoli, Yangonde, Yaisha, Yaoke and Linja to the Government post of Opala on the Lomami river.

A family group desirous of being given authority to change the names of its adolescent boys (the Mbole idiom: "changing the name" also indicates a change of status² first approaches the senior official of the local group of the *Lilwaakeri* society, who is known as *Ilanga*. After being presented with two goats, *Ilanga* goes with his assistant, *Ofinga*, to cut poles in the forest and to procure palm-fronds, the folioles of which are slit into thin strips. The poles are tied cross-wise to make a barrier at the opening of the family talking-shed and the palm-frond decorations are hung around the outside of this same shed. *Ilanga* and *Ofinga* then kill goats on the family rubbish-heap and eat the meat together. A room is prepared in one of the family houses for the reception of presents brought in by groups related by marriage (as described below). This hut is also decorated with palm-fronds.

In some Yaamba villages, a raffia-palm petiole is erected outside the talking-shed, tied to the crossed poles. It is on this *bofaka* that the *Lilwaakeri* society hoists the leopard-skin regalia used whenever they arbitrate over quarrels. Even if the leopard skin is not hoisted during the *ekanga* rites however, the family preparing for the ceremonies is expected to refrain from quarrels and harsh speaking; infringement of this rule would lead to heavy fines from the *Lilwaakeri* society in the locality. The *bofaka* sometimes has a small shell tied to it. The *kumi*-drummer may connect this shell with his wrist by a liana so that, as he beats his two gongs, the little shell "speaks" also.

In the talking-shed are to be found several gongs of varying sizes. The largest one occupies the length of the shed while a smaller one lies across its width, at right angles to the larger one and raised from the floor so that its mouth is level with the mouth of the larger instrument. The gongbeater stands between the two and by twisting his body can reach the mouth of both instruments. Announcements are made before dawn and also in the early evening. They may last for more than an hour. The gong-beater makes

¹ *ekanga* is the name given to the boy undergoing the rite; plural: *bikanga*.

² These *ekanga*-rites are the first stage in membership of the *Lilwaakeri* society.

the main announcements on the smaller gong with its shriller sounds, but punctuates them with short, characteristic refrains on the larger gong. At the end of the announcements, however, he frequently broadcasts on the large gong all that he has previously announced on the small gong. In other words, the large gong alone is adequate to broadcast the messages about the *ekanga*-rites, just as it is sufficient to announce any other Mbole messages. The *ekanga*-announcements do not differ linguistically or tonally from ordinary Mbole gong-messages; but the use of two instruments permits of a characteristic punctuation and so distinguishes these *ekanga*-announcements from any others.

The method of bringing gifts to the family organising the rites and of their subsequent distribution will be of interest and is also important for an understanding of some of the messages. Two groups of relatives by marriage are involved:

(a) the sons-in-law of the man organising the *ekanga*-rites; these people bring in currency tokens, namely: spears, knives with wooden handles, knives bearing a solid ball of iron at the end of the handle (called: *lisondo*-knives) and strips of skin from the *kenge*-antelope;

(b) the father-in-law or fathers-in-law of the family and his immediate relatives; these people bring domestic animals: dogs, fowls, goats.

The organiser of the ceremony then makes an exchange so that members of group (a) who brought currency leave with meat, while those of group (b) who brought meat leave with currency. Traditionally, the equivalence is reckoned as:

an antelope-skin strip	for a goat
a <i>lisondo</i> -knife with large iron ball	for a goat
a <i>lisondo</i> -knife with small iron ball	for a fowl
a spear	for a fowl
an ordinary knife	for a dog

It is because of this exchange of "meat" against currency that the gathering is referred to in the announcements as a market. The relatives called are also named in the announcements.

There are four stages in the preparations, each being characterised by a special refrain on the large gong:

Stage 1: announcements are punctuated by the words *kumi-oo* meaning: You kumi. Some typical announcements are:

<i>Large gong</i>	<i>Small gong</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
kumi-oo kumi-oo		you kumi, you kumi.
	mekana maseka meilo yeili	you relatives by marriage,
	okaka meko la akambo	hear the matters and palavers.
	bitonangokola imi	I am declaring
	yenangola enu otono	I tell you all
	yooko yooko yooko yooko	come come come come
	yasomba liongo sombele	to the market
	lya yeto la ilondo la	with metal, knives
	isima la yeka	and food.
kumi-oo		you kumi.
	yooko yakongo tokolokolo	come with firewood
	to ime	
	woana loloi ele liele	to make a fire to
	lisango	at the headman's place

<i>Large gong</i>	<i>Small gong</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
kumi-oo	yooko yasomba liongo sombele likelenge fololo eti la oliki eti la okoko	you kumi. come to the market the village is open it is not tied nor are there stumbling-blocks in the road.
kumi-oo	wetikala mbisa wekalangana ko otema-o	you kumi. if you stay behind you will be sorry in your heart.

After a period of about a month³ the *second stage* is reached and the announcements are punctuated by the phrase: *yaleke yaleke losolosolo* (come and eat food). Messages on the small gong are the same as those for the first stage. Sometimes the gong-beater addresses people passing by on the road and asks them for a gift (small coins, cigarettes). For instance, when a cyclist passed by, the following message was beaten out;

<i>Large gong</i>	<i>Small gong</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
yaleke yaleke losolosolo		come and eat
	wato wa oulu olekesananga	canoe of oulu wood with paddles
	osekweli osongo olimo	originating from the
	konda lokonda	white man
	etamana-o	pass by . . .
yaleke yaleke losolosolo		come and eat

It is of interest to note how a phrase coined for describing a canoe in the gong-language is here transformed and adapted to a more modern means of transport. If the person understands the gong-message, he will acknowledge it by shouting the usual Mbole greeting of *Olome shamba*. He will also make the small gift demanded. If on the other hand he ignores the message, the gong-beater makes an insulting reference to him on his instrument. For instance:

<i>Large gong</i>	<i>Small gong</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
yaleke yaleke losolosolo		come and eat
	efefe eloaloe	coward
	mbuli nama olenga	you goat, stupid goat
	alenge	
	emeotamatama ofuweli	passing by to no purpose
	totuku alinga kengo	with your tattooed face ⁴
yaleke yaleke losolosolo		come and eat

The *third stage* follows after further presents to the *Lilwaaksi* officials and brings the authorisation to punctuate the messages with: *yekela fukufuku*, meaning "It budes", as of a post planted firmly in the ground but now being pulled up. The suggestion here

³ The period of time elapsing between the stages depends on the ability of the organizer of the rites to satisfy exacting demands by the *Lilwaaksi* officials in food and other presents. My informants stated that only rich men can afford to organize these rites and that many never get beyond the first stage.

⁴ This was in reference to the origin of the cyclist—a Lokele man with characteristic blue line on the forehead.

is that the father of the family group organizing the *ekanga*-rites for his boys is succeeding in overcoming the resistance of the *Lilwaakwi* elders. The messages are again similar to those of the first stage. One message heard reminds listeners of the need to refrain from harsh speaking and quarrelling during the preparations for the *ekanga*-rites:

<i>Large gong</i>	<i>Small gong</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
yekela fukufuku		it budges
yekela fukufuku	yatikeke isima la yeka-o	bring food
	ofoke sɔni ofoke likakɔ	do not let shameful things
	lya ɔnɔkɔ	be heard nor mouth
yekela fukufuku		it budges

The final announcement is: *lɔkaɛnganela-ɔ*, meaning: it is ready. This final stage is called *taka* and members of the clan gather together to observe the boys who are undergoing the *ekanga*-rites. The lads are taken into the forest and told their new names; they are smeared with white chalk and red camwood powder and decorated with feathers in their hair. They must not speak until they are back in the village and told to dance. Back in the courtyard of the family group, the presiding elder brings forward each boy in turn, shouting to the assembled company: This lad used to be called so-and-so; He is no longer called so-and-so, he is now called . . . and declares his new name. The whole company responds with a loud: *Hoo*, and this is accompanied by blasts on horns. The boy must then dance around the various groups in the courtyard. It is said that relatives often use this occasion to torture boys who have been unruly or impolite.

In the evening the *teke* dance is begun. The traditional clothing for this is a piece of raffia-cloth worn around the loins (the *Mbolɛ* do not wear raffia-cloth for any other occasion). Village groups usually dance separately (people who are not members of the group holding the *ekanga*-rites may come to the *teke*-dance). But even so, this dance is usually productive of quarrels. Palm-wine figures largely in the feast available to members of the group attending and drunkenness is common as the day wears on. I have been in a village a day after the *teke* dance and seen the street littered with manioc stems and leaves as well as banana plants uprooted and broken down from nearby village plantations. The *bikanga* do not remove their decorations until three or four weeks after the *teke* dance. Then they all bathe together in the early morning and the rites are considered to be over.

I have tried to describe in some details these *ekanga*-rites because of their interest for ethnology. From the musicological point of view it is worth noting that the use of a plurality of tones does not necessarily indicate that linguistic elements associated with them have more than two essential tones or that the normal tonal distinction is thereby deformed.